

Corpus-based Research on the Development of Theme Choices in Chinese Learners' English Speech

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The research is financed by Southwest University No. 100030—2120100367.

Abstract

This study investigates the development of Theme choices in learner English speech and aims to find out how Theme choices in English speech of Chinese learners of English change from a lower language proficiency level to a higher language proficiency level. The corpus consists of comparable spoken data of intermediate Chinese learners of English, advanced Chinese learners of English and native speakers of English. Halliday's model of thematic organization is used to analyze the gathered data for Theme types and Theme markedness. The results of the study reveal that with the length of time learning English increasing, the learners become better at making Theme choices: they move closer to native speakers in Theme choices in terms of Topical Themes, Textual Themes, and Theme markedness. The use of textual Themes and marked Themes, two areas where intermediate Chinese learners of English have problems, are also studied, and two possible causes are elaborated on. Further studies are needed in order to find out whether learners of English who receive instructions in Theme choices would outdo those without such instructions, and if so, how much and in which aspects they would outdo them.

Keywords: Theme choices, Theme types, Theme markedness, learner English speech, development

1. Introduction

Theme is defined by Halliday (1994: 38) as the element in a particular structural configuration Theme and Rheme which organizes the clause as a message. It is the starting point for the message and the ground from which the clause is taking off. Theme helps us know what the clause will be about and what the author is going to tell us. Two examples are given to show how Theme influences the meaning of the clause.

1. A halfpenny is the smallest English coin.
2. The smallest English coin is a halfpenny.

In the first sentence, the Theme is "a halfpenny", which means the writer wants to tell us about "a halfpenny" but in the second sentence, the Theme is "the smallest English coin", and this means the writer wants to tell us about "the smallest English coin".

The effect of Theme choices on the meaning of the clause and discourse has been taken into account in language education and there have been numerous studies on how Theme choices in learner target language output deviate from native speakers/writers, and how instructions in Theme choices can help learners improve coherence in target language output.

Quite a number of studies have found deviation of Theme choices not only in learner language of different mother language backgrounds from native speakers/writers of English (CHEN, 2010; CHENG, 2002; Herriman, 2011; HU, 2008; Lores, 2004; WANG, 2010; ZHANG, 2004), but also in scholarly articles, the native languages of whose authors are not English, through the studies of research article abstracts (Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012; Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2011; Jalilifar, 2010 A; Jalilifar, 2010 B; Lores, 2004). These studies investigated learners of English/non English-native scholars of different mother language backgrounds, including Swedish (Herriman, 2011), Iranian (Jalilifar, 2010A & B) and Chinese (WANG, 2010; HU, 2008; CHEN, 2010). By making comparisons between the target language output of the learners of English/non-native-English scholars with that of native speakers/writers, the studies conclude that learners of English/non-native-English scholars use Themes differently from native speakers/writers. It is also found that learners of English tend to overuse interactional Themes (Herriman, 2011; HU, 2008; CHEN, 2010), textual Themes (HU, 2008; CHEN, 2010), marked Themes (HU, 2008; CHEN, 2010), and multiple Themes (HU, 2008). CHENG (2002) contends that a major reason for the lack of unity and coherence in Chinese students' English writings is inappropriate Theme choices which are not connected either to preceding Themes or succeeding Themes. It is also suggested that there is a need of informing local writers of English of the crucial role of Thematic choices in the writing of ELT articles (Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2011) and that the genre of writing would influence learners' use of Theme types and marked Themes (Jalilifar, 2010 A).

A number of studies have confirmed that training in Theme choices could help improve learners' Theme choices, thus helping improve coherence in writing (Mulatsih, 2010; Ho, 2009; LIU & LIU, 2013). Mulatsih (2010) did a classroom action research to investigate whether such trainings could improve the coherence of the students'

writings and the result shows significant improvement on the coherence in the students' writings indicated by the increased mean scores in every cycle. Ho (2009) investigated how helping students analyze the macro and micro elements following Systemic Textual Analysis (STA) of a text could help them improve the overall structure and texture of their own writing by comparing the pre- and post-instruction pieces of review writings produced by an ESL undergraduate in the English class, and discusses the extent to which progress has been made in the student's post-instruction text in terms of structure and texture and also the implications of such an approach for further language teaching and learning directions. LIU & LIU (2013) verified the validity of the application of Theme theory in teaching English writing and found that writing coherence relies on the success of Thematic structure of texts and that the significant progress in writing coherence contributes to the significant improvement on overall writing proficiency.

However, these conclusions are not conclusive because few studies included control groups to rule out the possibility that the improvement in coherence could simply be the result of language development. Thematic progression has already been proved to be under positive influence of language proficiency (Jalilifar, 2010 A). He made frequency and functional analysis of thematization of 90 college students' English compositions, based on Halliday (1985, as cited in Jalilifar, 2010A) and McCabe (1999, as cited in Jalilifar, 2010A) models of thematicity, with an educated native speaker as a criterion measure. The results showed that students' level of language proficiency monitor the use of linear and split thematic progression chains. In other words, as learners' target language proficiency improves, it is probable that their Theme choices also improve. Therefore, there is the possibility that the learners' improvement in Theme choices in the target language output is simply a result of natural language development instead of the instruction they have received in Theme choices.

The present study focuses on the development of Theme choices in learner English speech and aims to find out how Theme choices in English speech of Chinese learners of English change from a lower language proficiency level to a higher language proficiency level.

With the findings from previous studies, we hypothesize that Theme choices in English speech of Chinese learners of English develop with their language proficiency level, by which it is meant that Chinese learners' Theme choices in the target language become more native like as they become more proficient in the target language. We are going to test this hypothesis in a comparison study between two groups of Chinese learners of English, intermediate and advanced, with native speakers as the research baseline. The hypothesis is confirmed if advanced Chinese learners' Theme choices in their English speech are found to be closer to those of native speakers than intermediate Chinese learners of English.

In order to do this, we will first find out the differences in Theme choices, i.e., Theme types and Theme markedness, in the English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English and advanced Chinese learners of English, and secondly, we will discuss what these differences tell us. Therefore, the present research aims to answer the following questions:

- (1). What are the differences in Theme types (i.e., topical Theme, textual Theme and interpersonal Theme) in the English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English and advanced Chinese learners of English?
- (2). What are the differences in Theme markedness in the English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English and advanced Chinese learners of English?
- (3). What do these differences tell us?

2. Research Design

2.1 Data

The core research corpus consists of comparable spoken data of intermediate Chinese learners of English, advanced Chinese learners of English and native speakers of English. The spoken data of intermediate Chinese learners of English are selected from *Spoken and Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners* (WEN et al, 2010), comprising 20 oral English compositions produced in TEM-4 in China in 2001 by 20 second-year Chinese college English majors; the topic for the composition is "Describe a teacher of yours whom you find unusual". The spoken data of advanced Chinese learners of English are selected from the Chinese component of *The Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage*, comprising of 20 oral English compositions produced by 20 third-year and fourth-year Chinese college English majors (LINDSEI; Granger et al., as cited in CHEN, 2010); in this oral English composition, the students are asked to describe a meaningful experience, an impressive country or an impressive film/drama. And the spoken data of native speakers of English are selected from *The Louvain Corpus of Native English Conversation*, comprising of 20 English oral compositions by 20 American college students whose native language is English, in which they are also asked to describe a meaningful experience, an impressive country or an impressive film/drama (LOCNEC; cf. De Cock, 2004, as cited in CHEN, 2010).

We consider the statistics from the above data comparable in terms of the genre of the topics and the type of oral output. The topics for the three sets of data are description of people, item or event, all of which are narration. In

addition, the English speech by all the three groups of students is instantaneous output because the students have only 3 to 5 minutes for preparation and are required not to take any notes in preparation.

2.2 Analytical Model

Halliday's (1994) model of thematic organization was used to analyze the gathered data for Theme types and Theme markedness. He categorizes the elements which occur in the thematic position of the clause as follows:

1. Topical Theme is the first element which has a function in transitivity (Halliday, 1994: 53); it may cover nominal groups, prepositional phrases, or adverbial groups (ibid, 44).
2. Textual Theme is any combination of conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts, and continuatives (ibid: 53).
3. Interpersonal Theme is any combination of vocative, modal and mood-marking (ibid: 55).

The typical ordering is textual ^ interpersonal ^ topical. Example 2(1) provides an instance for Theme types.

Example 2(1):

well	but	then	surely	Jean	wouldn't	the best idea	be to join in
textual	textual	textual	interpersonal	interpersonal	interpersonal	topical	
Theme							Rheme

Another categorization used in this research is Halliday's (1994: 44-47) distinction between marked and unmarked Themes:

1. Unmarked Theme: Thematic position is engaged by participants, extraposition, existential, thematic equative, processes which function as grammatical subject.

Example 2(2): I lost my wife on Saturday night.

2. Marked Theme: Thematic position is occupied by prepositional phrases, adverbial groups and complements that are nominal groups which don't function as grammatical subjects.

Example 2(3): On Saturday night, I lost my wife.

2.3 Unit of Analysis

In this research, T-unit is used as the basic unit of analysis. T-unit is a clause complex which contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it (Fries, 1995: 318). We use T-unit because

analyzing Theme at the level of T-unit rather than the individual clause makes it easier to focus on patterns of thematic development in large amounts of text, and can also be justified on the grounds that the thematic structure of a dependent clause is often constrained by the independent clause (Fries & Francis, 1992: 6, as cited in Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012).

2.4 Procedure

For the oral output of intermediate Chinese learners of English, we first divide each oral composition into T-units and indicate division of Theme and Rheme in each T-unit with the sign "+". We then label the type of Theme in that T-unit, i.e., topical Theme, textual Theme and interpersonal Theme, and whether the topical Theme is marked, as shown in example 2(4). The frequency of Theme types would then be reported and the use of Theme types would be discussed.

Example 2(4)

S17 01-001-017: 28	Type of Theme	Theme markedness
I + had a in deep impression on a teacher of mine when I was in high school.	Topical	
He+ 's a teacher who teaches maths,	Topical	
but I + think his <kebii> ... eh ... calculated ability is very poor.	Textual Interpersonal Topical	
He + is young,	Topical	
but not like other young people, +he didn't likes fashion at all.	Textual Topical	+
.....		

We use the statistics provided in CHEN (2010) for advanced Chinese learners of English and native speakers, including the frequency and proportion of the topical Theme, textual Theme, interpersonal Theme, and marked Theme.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Theme Types

Research question 1: What are the differences in Theme types in the English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English and advanced Chinese learners of English?

Table 1 compares the use of Theme types in intermediate Chinese learners of English (ICLE) and advanced Chinese learners of English (ACLE), with native speakers (NS) as the baseline. The table shows that there are obvious differences in the use of all three types of Themes in ICLE sample and ACLE sample. The proportion of topical Themes is larger in ICLE sample than ACLE sample (70% vs 57%), while the proportions of both textual Themes and interpersonal Themes in ICLE sample are smaller than ACLE sample (25% vs 36% and 5% vs 7% respectively).

Table 1 Use of topical Themes, textual Themes and interpersonal Themes in ICLE, ACLE and NS samples

	samples					
	ICLE		ACLE		NS	
Topical Themes	433	70%	1802	57%	1851	59%
Textual Themes	158	25%	1149	36%	1150	37%
Interpersonal Themes	30	5%	214	7%	130	4%
Total T-units	433		1802		1851	

It can be seen from Table 1 that the proportion of topical Themes in the total number of the three types of Themes found in English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English is larger than that found in English speech of both advanced Chinese learners of English and native speakers. This means that intermediate Chinese learners of English use less multiple Themes in their speech. The use of less multiple Themes could be explained by learners' efforts trying to avoid the cognitive and linguistic complexity involved. In contrast with multiple Themes, simple Themes are characterized by a single structural element represented by just one unit. Multiple Themes require more effort for comprehension, thus less preferred than the single structural element of simple Themes (DAI, 2009).

It can also be seen from Table 1 that the proportion of textual Themes in the total number of the three types of Themes found in English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English is smaller than that found in English speech of both advanced Chinese learners of English and native speakers.

A further study of the textual Themes used in English speech by intermediate Chinese learners of English reveals that there are problems with their use of textual Themes both in quantity and variety. Textual Themes include continuatives such as "yes", "no", "well", "oh", "now", etc., conjunctions such as "and", "yet", "so", "even if", "but", "then", and conjunctive adjuncts such as "therefore" and "in other words" (Halliday, 2004). Table 2 lists how the three types of textual Themes are used in ICLE samples.

Table 2: Types of textual Themes in ICLE samples

Expression	Frequency	Type
and	76	Conjunctions
but	29	Conjunctions
so	19	Conjunctions
then	8	Conjunctions
for example	4	Continuatives
because	3	Continuatives
thus	2	Continuatives
other	17	Continuatives & conjunctive adjuncts

A number of things deserve attention from what is shown in Table 2. Firstly, intermediate Chinese learners of English use a lot of conjunctions (85%), and less continuatives and conjunctive adjuncts (15%), while research findings (Jalilifar, 2009) reveal that only 68% of the Textual Themes found in native speakers' speech are conjunctions, and 32% are continuatives and conjunctive adjuncts. In addition, intermediate Chinese learners of English overuse "and". In the 158 Textual Themes that are used by intermediate Chinese learners of English, the top four expressions are "and", "but", "so" and "then", all of which are conjunctions and account for almost 50% of the all the textual Themes used. In a further study of 5 oral compositions numbered from S20-01-001-015 to S20-01-001-020, we found that students use "and" in places where there is no need for it. There are altogether 48 textual Themes, and 37 of them are "and". However, in at least 22 places, the word "and" does not fulfill the function of Textual Theme.

According to Collins COBUILD Learner's Dictionary (2006) and Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (2009), the word "and" could be used to link two clauses when the second clause is a result of the first clause. Collins COBUILD Learner's Dictionary (2006) lists another use of "and" at the beginning of a sentence to introduce something else that you want to add to what has just been said, but it is also pointed out that some people think this use is incorrect. The following four examples can shed some light on how "and" is

not used properly as textual Theme in the English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English. The word “and” is underlined when it is used as textual Theme.

Example 3(1):

...Actually, Mrs. Brown was not so bad temper because sometimes he is just ... as lovely as an old lady, and she was a very good teacher, and ... we must change our ... minds of him ...

(S16-01-001-016)

Example 3(2):

... One morning, when he hurry into the classroom, our class burst into a laughing, because he hadn't ... eh ... come his head at all, and it was so untidy <untidied> . And ... I have never seen <seened> again pockets tight around his neck properly...

(S17 01-001-017)

Example 3(3):

... The teacher ... was a ... mouth ... was ... has all ... all ... is all ... is all has also a bad smell because his most cigarettes, and I think maybe he's too lazy to clean his mouth...

(S17 01-001-017)

Example 3(4):

... During my school days I have many, many teachers. And one I will never forget was Mr Zhou.

(S19-01-001-019)

3.2. Theme Markedness

Research question 2: What are the differences in Theme markedness in the English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English and advanced Chinese learners of English?

Table 3: Theme markedness in ICLE, ACLE and NS samples

	ICLE		ACLE		NS	
Marked themes	109	25%	227	13%	93	5%
Unmarked themes	324	75%	1575	87%	1758	95%
Total	433		1802		1851	

Table 3 compares Theme markedness in English speech samples of intermediate Chinese learners of English (ICLE) and advanced Chinese learners of English (ACLE), with native speakers as the baseline (NS). The Table shows that intermediate Chinese learners of English (25%) use a lot more marked themes than both advanced Chinese learners of English (13%) and native speakers (5%). While there are no grammatical problems placing the adjunct, object, or complement of the clause in Theme, the resulting marked-Theme constructions have an influence on discourse coherence, signaling textual break and pragmatic highlighting (CHEN, 2010).

A more detailed analysis of the use of the marked Themes reveal that 65% of the marked Themes in English speech of intermediate Chinese learners of English are adjuncts of time, while 64% of the marked Themes in English speech of advanced Chinese learners of English concern a temporal relationship (CHEN, 2010: 84). The intermediate Chinese learners of English do not seem to differ a lot from the advanced learners of English in the use of adjuncts of time as marked Themes, and both of them use about 10% more adjuncts of time as marked Themes than native speakers (CHEN, 2010: 84).

Apart from adjuncts of time, the intermediate Chinese learners of English also put contingency relations, adjuncts of space and other elements in marked Themes. Table 4 provides details for frequency and proportion of these elements.

Table 4: Marked Themes in intermediate Chinese learners of English

Type	Marked themes	Adjuncts of time	Contingency relations	Adjuncts of space	Other elements
Frequency	111	72	29	5	5
proportion	100%	65%	25%	5%	5%

Examples 3(5) and 3(6) are two excerpts of English speech taken respectively from ICLE sample and NS sample. There is a difference in the way information is organized. The learner's speech (3(5)) contains frequent temporal expressions at the clause-initial position. The discourse is structured into temporal segments. In comparison, the Theme slots in the native speaker narrative in (3(6)) are invariably filled by the participant coded by pronouns “I” and “we” with a few “it” and a relative pronoun “which”. By keeping the participants in Theme and the temporal adjuncts in Rheme, the focus of narrative remains on the sequence of the events. This thematic pattern of participant-continuity is in line with the findings of previous research. It is the principle method of textual development in various genres, including narrative (Halliday, 2004; Hasselgård, 2009).

Example 3(5)

...

When we passed Mr. Cai's office, we found that his office was still ... his office's ... light ... was still on.
We did ... all of us ... thought ... thought that it must be Mr. Cai, because he is the only teacher who works so late, ... who works so late,
and ... and ... half and ... two ... two hours a ... later. I found out I have left something really important in the classroom, and I must went there and fetch ... fetch up.
When I passed Mr Cai's office, I found ... I found that ... he was still working there.
 I ... I was about to step in and asked Mr ...

...
 (S6-01-001-06)

Example 3(6)

...
 and we drove down through France
 yeah .. which is . quite a long way
 but we did it we did it really solidly
 we went for like a day
 and ZA(we).. left really really early
 we managed to get just <X> the northern part of Italy like by the[i:] evening
 er we went on a sea cat yeah
 it's pretty fast
 it's only about half an hour or something
 ...

(NS-TP014, as cited in CHEN, 2010)

3.3 Development of Theme Choices in Learner English Speech

Research question 3: What do these differences tell us?

The differences in the use of Theme types and Theme markedness between intermediate Chinese learners of English and advanced Chinese learners of English show an obvious development of Theme choices in learner English speech from a lower language proficiency level to a higher language proficiency level. In other words, the more proficient one is with the English language, the better one is at choosing the right kind of information to put in Theme.

It can be seen in Figure 1 that on the whole, language proficiency has positive effects on the use of Theme types, which is shown by how much closer advanced Chinese learners of English are to native speakers in the use of two of the three Theme types than intermediate Chinese learners of English.

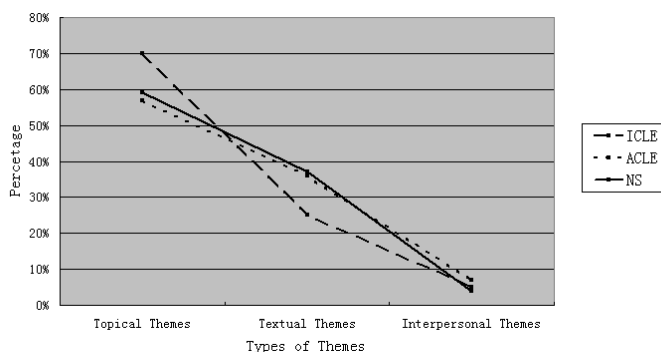


Figure 1 Speaker types and Theme types

When displayed in frequency polygon, the statistics tell us that advanced Chinese learners of English are much closer to native speakers in the use of two of the three Theme types, i.e. topical Themes and textual Themes, which indicates that the ability to choose the right kind of information to put in Theme improves with the length of time learning the target language. However, we notice that the intermediate Chinese learners of English are closer to native speakers in the use of interpersonal Themes, which needs further study.

It can also be seen in Figure 2 that language proficiency has positive effects on Theme markedness, which is shown by how much closer advanced Chinese learners of English are to the native speakers in the use of marked Themes than intermediate Chinese learners of English.

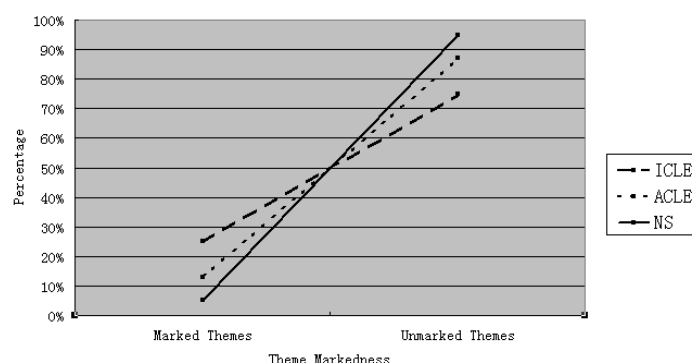


Figure 2: Speaker types and Theme markedness

When displayed in frequency polygon, the statistics tell us that advanced Chinese learners of English are much closer to native speakers in the use of marked Themes: they use much less marked Themes (13%) than intermediate Chinese learners of English (25%), as compared to native speakers (5%).

3.4 Summary

The research findings confirm our hypothesis that with the length of time learning English increasing, the learners become better at making Theme choices: they move closer to native speakers in Theme choices in terms of topical Themes, textual Themes, and Theme markedness, thus rendering the conclusions from previous studies focusing on the effects of instructions in Theme choices less conclusive. Further studies are needed to find out whether learners of English who receive instructions in Theme choices would outdo those without instructions in Theme choices, and if so, how much and in which aspects they would outdo them.

Apart from this, the research findings also show that both intermediate Chinese learners of English and advanced Chinese learners of English deviate from native speakers in Theme choices in English speech, which could be explained by two reasons. One is negative transfer of their mother language Chinese. In terms of Theme choices, Chinese language has two distinct differences from English language: topic as Theme and more fronted adjuncts. In English in most cases, the Theme of a clause coincides with the subject, while in Chinese the Theme of a clause usually coincides with the topic. That the subject coincides with the Theme occurs only in less than 50% of the sentences in Chinese (LI, 2002:20). Chinese learners of English tend to start with what is topic in Chinese when they speak English, which becomes marked Themes. In addition, Chinese learners seem to have a tendency to pre-pose adjuncts of the clause more often than native speakers of English. Previous research (Hasselgård, 2009; Rowley-Julivet & Carter-Thomas, 2005) has shown that information sequencing is an important area of L2 discourse-pragmatic proficiency subject to the influence of L1. Studies on Chinese EFL learners have also demonstrated that the information structure of Chinese influences their choice of Theme markedness in English (CAI, 1998; FANG, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1996; ZHAO, 1998; ZHANG, 2004).

The other reason is communication strategy employed in speaking. In spoken Chinese, the prominence of Theme is often marked by hesitations, pauses, hedges and particles at Theme-Rheme junctures (Chappell et al., 2009; CHU, 1998; Ho 1993; Tsao, 1990). In spoken English, the Theme-Rheme Theme juncture allows time for the speaker to plan the rest of the clause. The position of adjuncts is more flexible and independent from other elements of the clause whereas the subject is more tightly bound to the predicate. Hence, marked Themes in the form of adjuncts offer greater possibility for pauses than unmarked Themes, which is usually the subject of the clause (CHEN, 2010).

4. Conclusion

The present study investigated the development of Theme choices in the English speech of Chinese learners of English. We found that advanced Chinese learners of English are much closer to native speakers in use of topical Themes, textual Themes and marked Themes than intermediate Chinese learners of English. We therefore confirm that Theme choices of Chinese learners of English in English speech improve without special training or instructions in this area. We also investigated the use of textual Themes and marked Themes, two areas where intermediate Chinese learners of English have problems with and elaborated on the two causes that lead to this deviation.

In line with these findings, we suggest that further studies be conducted to find out whether learners of English who receive instructions in Theme choices would outdo those without instructions in Theme choices, how much better they would outdo those without instructions and in which aspects they would outdo them.

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